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ABSTRACT

Although basic education and English as a Second Language constitute core components of adult education, older persons have not been a target for language programs until recently. Research indicates a great need for and interest in adult basic education among language-restricted seniors who seek the every day rewards of language fluency. Gerontologists can help in meeting these needs through research into learning characteristics and motivation of older learners, field and evaluation research on programs serving adults in a variety of settings, training adult educators, and advising in the preparation of curriculum materials. No single discipline or profession has access to all elements critical to a successful literacy program for older students. Rather, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration among senior center administrators, social service agency workers, curriculum development specialists, and educational administrators is essential for success in the recruitment, counseling, and placement of students; the training and supervision of instructors; the preparation of instructional materials; and liaison with educational funding agencies. The ideal program delivery system must coordinate the efforts of various institutions and disciplines with the purpose of language mastery for older adults. Gerontologists can serve as a catalyst in bringing together these different elements and creating linkages within and outside the college. (KL)

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ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: PROSPECTS FOR INTEGRATION OF EDUCATION AND GERONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Basic education and language programs meet an important need of older persons. Gerontologists can contribute to such programs, now receiving Federal attention, through research, evaluation, training, curricula and administrative activities. Successful models will depend upon intrauniversity and university/community collaboration among educators, language specialists, social service workers and gerontologists.

Basic education (which refers to English as a second language as well as literacy), long considered essential for all persons, constitutes a core component of adult education. Despite increased attention to minority poor elderly and the concurrent growth of programs in Adult Basic Education (ABE) since the 1965 passage of the Adult Education Act, older persons have not been a target for language programs. Neglect of language-restricted older persons stems from the social services' emphasis on "primary needs" (housing, medical care, legal rights) and from public adult education's expressed mission of older persons in basic education and inhibit recognition of their language deficits.

Recently, however, Federal and State interest in the elderly as a target population for ABE has grown, State departments of education have supported special projects to plan for older person's participation in ABE/ESL programs. The Institute of Study for Older Adults (ISOA), of New York City Technical College, Division of Continuing Education, is currently engaged in one such project. Results indicate substantial unmet needs for language learning among the elderly, a lack of research on elderly language acquisition, and almost no

models of program organization and administration. The development of ABE for older adults offers gerontologists a new arena for research, development and training activities, in collaboration with other disciplines.

NEEDS, INTERESTS, AND MOTIVATIONS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Increasing educational opportunity throughout the 20th century has created a double bind for, older adults: as the least educated age group, they live in a world which values education far more than did the America of their youth. Their language deficits reflect the limited opportunities of race and class as well as age. Primarily black, native American, Hispanic, or recent immigrants, they worked at low-paying, low status jobs (domestics, laborers, service employees) and now depend on Supplementary Security Income for survival.

The Background Paper on Education of the 1971 White House Conference on Aging stated that "two-thirds of Americans over 65 have had no schooling beyond the eighth grade and one out of five cannot read or write well to deal competently with the complexities of modern life"(NRTA/AARP, 1976, p.47). As of 1976 one in ten of all elderly Blacks had not completed first grade (Heisel, 1980). In the same year 34.9% of older Blacks and 51% of older Hispanics in New York State had less than 5 years education (New York State, 1976). In a special study of New York City conducted three years earlier, one-half of the 1.6 million adults qualifying for ABE were found to be 60 or over (Bernstein,1973). Yet older persons' participation in Adult Education Act programs has hovered around 3% for the last decade (Cain and Whalen, 1974; Cain and Whalen, 1978, Cain and Whalen, 1979; Whalen, 1979). Estrada reports that Spanish-origin and American Indian elderly have the highest illiteracy rate of any sub-group (1977). The Special Concern Section on Spanish Speaking Elderly at the White House Conference considered lack of English to be "perhaps the most pervasive handicap the Spanish-Speaking elderly has. There is a high correlation existing between his inability

to speak English and his lack of awareness of the very few services, activities, and programs to which he is entitled" (Report, 1971, p.3).

There is great interest in ABE among language restricted seniors. In the New York State Needs Assessment, older persons more than any other age group expressed desire for English as a Second Language classes. Although the elderly made up less than one-twentieth of the Assessment's adult sample, they accounted for one-sixth of the interest in basic education. (Veres, 1980).

Although the justification for language programs has often rested with their social service/life skills functions (that is, as training for specifics such as getting jobs, renting an apartment, etc.), student motivations are usually more general and refer to pride and the everyday rewards of language fluency. In our interviews with seniors, potential students did cite situation-specific needs, (such as learning medical terms and reading government documents), but stressed their desire for communicative competence. Older basic education students want to correspond with distant family and to read newspapers; a common goal is "to read a book", any book. Elderly speakers of other languages want simply to make friends with English-speaking peers, to listen to English radio and television, to shop and ride the bus outside their neighborhood. Clearly, the ability to negotiate services is important to elders, but it is the expressive power of the written and spoken word which motivates older (as well as younger) persons to seek out ABE and ESL.

RESEARCH NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Older persons' capacity to acquire a new language or to master the written language has not been investigated. Gerontologists and psychologists have refuted the myth of age-related learning limits.[1] Yet findings can be cited both

[1] A paper on this topic is available from ISOA.

for and against language acquisition ability among the elderly, in large part because the research has not been directed to the question of language learning. Yet, ISOA's experience with limited numbers of classes indicates that under the right conditions, success is possible. While we know something about these conditions, gerontologists can undertake laboratory and field research which focuses on the "fit" between older peoples' cognitive deficits and skills and the intellectual functions necessary to language learning.

Current knowledge of cognition needs to be applied to the classroom. What does the study of memory retrival strategies in the aged imply for language learning? Is "situational" ESL enough or would the "functional/notional" approach (which provides categories based on usage rather than grammar) best serve this population? If illiterates do not decode letters as readers do, will older persons with declining spatial integration acuity need special attention? Integration of research results with classroom practice could provide answers.

What are the aspirations of older ABE students: what will learners do with their new facility? What makes older persons "ready" to learn language skills-have they merely lacked opportunity or does the diminished pressure of job and family responsibilities free them? Do family attitudes affect student motivation and participation? Are there mental and physical health implications of learning to talk with a doctor or read a prescription? How much islolation have language-restricted older people suffered from their inability to write and read family letters or make new friends? Will learning communication skills reduce this loneliness? These are suggestive of some of the research questions gerontologists could explore in the coming decade.

Most educators, frankly have ignored the functionally illiterate, non-English speaking elderly. Even those which attempt to serve this group, like the

ISOA, are unprepared to offer the intensive, long-term classes which basic education requires. As a result, most ABE programs for the elderly, spring from local initiative and are beset by structural problems: lack of trained teachers, few and appropriate books and materials, irregular class meetings, noisy or distracting rooms, travel demands upon the elder students. And, of course, the careful planning, monitoring and evaluation research necessary to ensure success and document impact have been lacking. More programs are desperately needed, but vital to the effort are studies of how critical choices-of community sites, recruitment methods, content, teaching methods and materials-work. Though we question the value of the current sporadic efforts at literacy training for the elderly, how would the same students fare in established ABE programs with younger adults? Will the institutional setting, or travel, or being in class with younger people, inhibit older students? Field and evaluation research on programs which involve older students in a variety of settings can provide answers to these questions.

Gerontologists can also contribute to preparation of materials and teacher training. Linguists, educators, and gerontologists together could produce texts which are appropriate to the older learner's interests and intellectual powers. ABE teachers have little or no experience with the elderly; they are eager for staff training. Gerontologists can provide them with an understanding of the aging process, and of the intellectual capacities, learning characteristics, and motivations of older students.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT REQUIREMENTS

No single discipline or profession has access to all the elements critical to successful administration of literacy programs for older students. The chart below indicates the prime requisites for program functioning and the professions with potential for input into these functions.

	G	S.S.	Ed.	L
Identification of needs of target population	X	X		
Access to population		X		
Recruitment	X	X		
Placement	X	X	X	
Counselling	X	X	X	
Course Design (format, content, materials techniques)	X		X	X
Class site choices	X	X	X	

G-Gerontology
SS-Social Service, including senior centers
Ed-Educators
L-Linguists/Language experts

Both interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration will be required to mount effective language skills programs for older students. Knowledge of the aging process, and of the status and motivation of language-deficient elderly will be critical to appropriate identification, recruitment, placement, and counselling of older students. Access to the target population at the most likely point of entry-the senior center-can only be provided through the "aging network". Staffs of social service agencies often function as "gatekeepers" for programs. Literacy projects must plan recruitment and conduct of classes to enhance these agencies' own objectives and operations. Older adults display certain cognitive characteristics which imply particular learning methods and environments. Commonly, undereducated older students suffer from a "threshold problem" when reentering the classroom-a fear of repeating the defeats of 60 years earlier. The aged's greater susceptibility to interference from anxiety in learning tasks has been established. This obstacal to learning has particular force in those who have never experienced success in a classroom setting. Learning objectives, materials, and teaching styles must be designed or adapted not only to account for variance in cognitive functions and perceptual impairments, but for these fears. However, this process demands knowledge of theory and practical skills in both curriculum

development and "andragogy", "the art and science of helping adults learn", (Knowles, 1970, p. 38), for learning adults does not happen most successfully in an environment in which they feel they are being treated like children", (Eberleand and Robinson, 1980, P.33). Clearly, skills of educational administration, particularly of ABE programs, are essential to recruitment, counselling, and placement of students; to training and supervision of instructors and to work with educational funding agencies.

Given the funding likely to be available over the next decade, almost any one of the professions and agencies which sponsor educational or aging programs could go it alone in developing ABE programs targeted to older learners. Some already are. An ISOA survey of senior centers in New York City found that 28 of 42 had recognized a need for ABE or ESL among their members; of these, 18 had at some time attempted to offer classes, using volunteer teachers, CETA workers or other arrangements doomed to failure by the lack of adequate training, materials, supervision or support services. (Colleges were involved in only two of these programs and gerontologists in none). Some community agencies have a few older adults in ESL and ABE classes, but the chances for the older learner, in programs oriented to younger adults' needs, are indeed a "last gamble on education", (Mezirow, Darkenwald, and Knox, 1975). With the stimulus of additional federal funding area agencies on aging and existing ABE programs can cooperate in initiating and delivering either centralized or neighborhood-based programs for older language learners.[2]

2. The most feasible sites in urban area probably will be those agencies currently delivering effective services in communities. Which of the myriad of social services, educational, ethnic, or recreational settings will be chosen depends on the local demographic distribution and existing patterns of service delivery. The strongest possibilities, are either: a) organizations which currently administer effective neighborhood-based literacy programs (i.e. community college outreach programs, churches, ethnic and neighborhood groups, etc.) or b) agencies serving older adults (i.e. the aging network-senior centers, ethnic and religious organizations, nutrition programs or day centers, clinics etc.).

However, unless the area agencies have the resources to provide for teacher training and support services and ABE programs adapt curriculum and methods, such efforts also seem doomed. Both centralized and community-based educational agencies could manage such programs on their own. Many have strong ties with specific geographic and/or ethnic communities; however, these links may not be with agencies serving the elderly. Further, many ABE administrators accept as a priority (until recently endorsed by federal legislation and regulations) providing basic skills to make students more employable (Mezirow, et al, 1975, pp. 102-105). This bias and lack of experience with the elderly may impede recruitment, placement, counselling and instruction. Centers or institutes of gerontology with established community and social service linkages could develop such projects, but without the input of educators, and the help of those agencies working with the elderly poor, their efforts also may be less than effective.

A COLLABORATIVE MODEL

We suggest that, though difficult, the coordination of staff of differing institutions and disciplines, with varying professional orientations and levels and program responsibilities, is critical to success for the older language learner. Staff in community agencies must feel that activities are important to their agencies, for their support is vital for both instructors and students. Instructors and educational administrators must value equally the goal of languages mastery for older as well as for younger adult learners, must believe that older students can learn and must be prepared for flexibility in means of achievement of the goal. The "ideal" program delivery system must focus on providing supports for both instructor and older students to maximize the potential benefits of the teaching/learning relationship. The ultimate question of everyone involved is "What can I do to help these students learn to read and write (or to

speak English)?", whether the project is administered directly by a college or university, by an area agency on aging, by boards of education, or by a network of community organizations. The catalytic role for gerontologists is to bring together these elements (of university, social service, etc.) in support of instructors and students. For instructors, this will mean orientation and staff development, help in adaptation of curricula, materials and teaching techniques, support with student assessment and placement, organizing and conducting classes in a decent physical learning environment, free of interferrance and competing activities help in setting the climate for learning and in developing relationships with students which encourage growth and discourage dependency. Vital to older students' participation will be providing access: through local recruitment, choice of comfortable and familiar sites, and by reducing transportation barriers. Placement in classes and counselling appropriate to student needs are also critical. Beyond this, supportive activities in the host agency which encourage them to participate fully, and which help to transform a sense of deficiency into the desire to learn, will be as important as supports for instructors in teaching.

Acting as catalyst for such synergistic combination of the elements required for successful literacy projects for the aging will not be an easy task; just integrating the "jargons" of the professions involved-public administrators, adult educators, curriculum developers, linguists, gerontologists, social workers-is a formidable intellectual feat. Forging an organizational structure which coordinates program functions performed by university and social agencies requires enormous involvement in developing mutual objectives and the interrelationships critical to cooperation. Gerontologists can play a key role in delivery models of program development which create linkages both within and outside the university. The multi/interdisciplinary approach which has characterized (and confounded) the profession and the

academic entity predisposes many gerontologist to an intrauniversity collaboration which would involve cooperation in program and curriculum development with faculty educators, linguists and language specialists. Continuing supervision and input into on-going classes could be performed by graduate students in field placements. University/community interrelationships could be developed for purpose of program administration, involving a university "steering group" as planners and consultants to the social service, community, educational and area agencies sponsoring ABE and ESL courses. Though not unknown, organizing community education programs has not been a primary function for educational gerontologists. Nonetheless, this role seems appropriate in light of the goal expressed by a leader in the field -- "to interface the process and instituttions of education with the knowledge and need of human aging so that the quality of life of older citizens can be improved" (Peterson, 1978,pp.7-8).

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